

Harford Expects Good Things of base decisions *Pentagon's initial proposal entails gain of over 2,000 jobs at Proving Ground*

By Ted Shelsby
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Aberdeen Proving Ground, the sprawling military base known as the engine that pulls Harford County's economy, is expected to have an even greater impact as it stands to gain new jobs and continue the transformation into the Army's prime technology center.

County officials struggled to restrain their enthusiasm Friday when the Pentagon announced a long-awaited base closure and realignment proposal that called for the APG work force to grow by more than 2,000.

"This is a great day for Aberdeen and all of Harford County," County Executive James M. Harkins said after receiving a telephone briefing from Col. John T. Wright, APG garrison commander.

Harkins said he was trying to temper his remarks so that it would not sound like he was gloating, "because our gains are a result on some other base's loss."

Wyett Colclasure, president of the Army Alliance, a nonprofit county business advocacy group that works to strengthen the proving ground's future, was surprised by the proposed gains.

Colclasure said he had been cautiously optimistic that APG would benefit from the review, which is intended to improve the military's efficiency. But he acknowledged that the installation fared better than he expected.

Additionally, Colclasure and Harkins were as excited about the types of jobs coming to APG as they were about the number.

"Obviously, we are very pleased that APG has been ratified as the Army's technology center," said Colclasure. "Most of the things coming here are high-technology concerns."

"We have always viewed APG as a technology center, and this is being reinforced by the other elements that are being transferred here."

Harkins described most of the jobs coming to the post as high-tech positions.

"These are the kind of jobs that usually pay good wages," he said.

Said Aberdeen Mayor Doug Wilson: "We're losing about 3,000 soldiers, but we are gaining about 5,300 civilians. That's my understanding."

"This is going to have a big economic impact on the town," he said. "The people coming in are going to be highly paid people with lots of disposable income. They are going to be looking for housing, dining at restaurants, and supporting most other businesses in town. It is going to be good for our town."

With about 15,400 military, civilian and contractor employees, APG is the county's largest employer. The proving ground stimulates more than \$1.8 billion a year in economic activity in the state each year, according to the state Department of Business and Economic Development.

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That is about double the economic impact of the General Motors Corp. vehicle assembly plant in Southeast Baltimore during its heyday, when it operated two shifts a day and employees worked most weekends to meet consumer demand.

The proving ground generates \$831 million in employee compensation, or 27 percent of all the salaries and wages in Harford and Cecil counties.

To boost APG's image in the minds of Pentagon officials, the state and the county have been improving transportation links with the military base. Upgrades are being made to the Edgewood train station and to roads leading into the post.

Harkins noted that APG faces the threat of some losses, including the shift of the Ordnance Center and School to Fort Lee, Va.

George Mercer, a spokesman for the proving ground, said the Ordnance Center is where the Army trains its mechanical and maintenance soldiers to repair equipment, including motors, tanks and trucks.

"At any given time, they may have about 2,500 people on base," said Mercer. He said about 10,000 soldiers move through the school each year. "Some stay for six, eight or 10 weeks. Some for six months."

Said Harkins: "This was a very positive day," but he included a caution: "We are not out of the woods yet. These are just recommendations. The [base closure] process doesn't end until November."